

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 5, 1885

SIR HENRY COLE

Fifty Years of Public Work of Sir Henry Cole. Two vols. (London: George Bell and Sons, 1884.)

THIS book, though chatty and discursive enough in parts, will disappoint those who want to learn something of the personality and life of a doughty champion of some dozen reforms. The first part, from the racy pen of Sir Henry Cole himself, teems with lively comments and thrusts, *more suo*. The vigour of a man who believed in his mission, and rejoiced in the work of his own hands, appears on every page. No mark is required to indicate the transition from the dashing, animated narrative of the chief actor to the careful and cautious chapters written by his children. We do not see how either could give us what we chiefly want without offending against certain rules of delicacy which we are glad to know are not yet quite obsolete. The life of Sir Henry Cole, the inner history of his struggles, his successes and failures, the motive power, and an impartial view of the man in relation to his work—this has yet to be written. What he and his children between them have given us is a valuable collection of facts and documents bearing upon the most important progressive movements of our century.

To not a few the second volume will be more interesting than the first. The plan of the work is to give in the first volume a series of chapters which take in Sir H. Cole's principal work, and the corroborative and supplementary documents, with many curious illustrations, make up the second volume. The whole concludes with a most thorough-going verbal index, which would have rejoiced Sir Henry Cole's heart, for to him nothing was complete without an index.

Henry Cole had to face no ordinary difficulties in carrying out his work, but then he was just the man for difficulties. He would have been nowhere in piping times of peace. His appetite for a task grew as the opposition and hindrances grew. Probably no one ever knew him to be faint-hearted or broken in resources. At last it came to be felt that he would in any case carry his point, and timid natures gave way before the impetuosity of a knight whose sword had no scabbard, and who left himself no retreat. You could only beat him by cutting him to pieces—there was no other way. At the Paris Exhibition of 1855 he was known to the officials as *ce terrible Cole*—a man who, regardless of the methods of red tape, took the shortest way to his point, and did not know when he was beaten by all the rules of officialism.

Associated with this indomitable pluck was another quality which the English people love well. He had a never-failing flow of good spirits which burst forth in rollicking good humour, confusing and sometimes irritating to his opponents. We suspect that not a few of the enemies he made had suffered in their self-esteem from the sharpness of his common sense driven home by his reckless love of fun—at least of what was fun in him. Once, when giving an address, in a provincial town, on public libraries, as he was advocating the setting up of

reading-rooms where smoking would be allowed, a local magnate on the platform testily interrupted him with a formal protest and the remark that there was a public-house across the road. Sir Henry Cole, pausing in his discourse, surveyed his critic for a moment with a curious air, and then, turning to the audience, said in a loud "aside" and with the most perfect good humour:—"This gentleman seems to be a kind of pope down here." The cause of his antagonist collapsed amidst inextinguishable laughter. On another occasion the Education Code was under consideration, and one, not remarkable for hereditary wisdom, suggested that the poor children should be taught "legal economy," meaning thereby, as was explained, a knowledge of the laws of the land,— "And the Ten Commandments," interpolated Sir Henry Cole in a stentorian voice. People do not readily forgive such setting forth of their folly, but it was a temptation which an impulsive enthusiast could not resist.

In the short space allotted to this notice it would be unwise to indulge in extracts. If we take one, it is because it sets forth in Sir Henry Cole's own words the works of a public nature with which he was connected.

"The principal subjects which I now deal with are the reform of the system of preserving the inestimable public records of this country, dating from the time of the Norman Conquest, and unrivalled in Europe; my work in expediting the successful introduction of Rowland Hill's penny postage; the administration of railways; the application of fine art to children's books and then to manufactures, which led to the transfer of my duties to the Board of Trade; the Great Exhibition of 1851, and its successors; the reform of the Patent Laws; the establishment of schools of art and science classes throughout the United Kingdom; the South Kensington Museum; drill in public elementary schools as the basis of a national army; national training schools for music and for cookery; the Society of Arts, and public health."

To begin with the public records. Entering this office as a mere youth, his spirit was stirred within him when he saw the utter carelessness as regards documents "dating from the time of the Norman Conquest and unrivalled in Europe." For daring to call attention to the jeopardy in which these precious records were placed he was dismissed, and no doubt it was thought the insignificant youth was extinguished; but in the end young Cole dragged the affair before Parliament, and was triumphantly reinstated with something like full powers to carry out the much-needed reform. Our Public Records Office is now a credit to the administration of the country, but fifty years ago (so it was stated in Parliament) public records were boiled down for glue, and the clearer and better sort converted into jellies by the confectioners (Mr. Charles Buller's speech on Public Records, vol. ii. p. 86).

While at the Records Office, Henry Cole threw himself into the uniform penny postage movement. The particular task he undertook was to rouse popular enthusiasm for the reform, and we have Sir Rowland Hill's testimony that "he was the author of almost innumerable devices by which in his indefatigable ingenuity he contrived to draw public attention to the proposed measure." There is an amusing cut in the book (vol. ii. p. 102) representing one of these devices. Mr. Cole obtained a prize of 100*l.* from the Treasury for an essay on the best method of

carrying out some parts of the reform, and ultimately he was taken from the Records Office to assist in remodelling the postal system.

His next dealings were with railway administration, and he took part in the "battle of the gauges," but this work was, we should think, somewhat out of his line. It is dull and heavy reading after the fun and energy shown over postal reform. At length he emerges from dealings with railways and docks into the more pleasant paths of art. Under the *nom de plume* of Felix Summerly he produced handbooks on art. In this connection he threw himself into wood-engraving, and so "mastered the technicalities of etching on copper that my works obtained admission (vol. i. p. 103) to the Royal Academy." In Summerly's handbooks, also, essays in bookbinding were made, and the beautiful designs of Holbein, as well as the fifteenth century patterns for leather still remaining in Durham Cathedral, gave suggestions which were used. The Summerly tea-service, which won a prize offered by the Society of Arts, is still much admired. An engraving is given in vol. ii. p. 178. Out of his work under this head sprang his connection with the Board of Trade and their School of Design.

Henry Cole as Felix Summerly strove to "make art common"—a reproach he would have accepted joyfully. Assisted by the best art of his day, he produced artistic books for children, prepared descriptive catalogues of the art treasures of the country, and endeavoured to realise Gibson's ideal panel, in which is represented the marriage of Art and Commerce. His next move in this direction was to persuade the Society of Arts to get up a national exhibition of British manufactures. Prince Albert was the active President of this Society. It was he who developed the idea into a universal exhibition—the Great Exhibition of 1851. At this part the notes are particularly full. It is as if Henry Cole had never done anything remarkable before or since. If this gigantic undertaking was a gigantic success, the credit is largely due to the energy and ability of Henry Cole, who was rewarded with the decoration of C.B.

The work of the Great Exhibition and the other exhibitions which followed interfered for a while with the development of the two greatest undertakings of this busy creative life. We refer to the South Kensington Museum and the Science and Art Department. The Museum stands by general admission first of such institutions. Here the designer and the artisan may study a vast collection of the products of human ingenuity. The idea seems to have sprung naturally from the Great Exhibition of 1851. If such a show be good for the development of manufacturing and mechanical ingenuity and for creating artistic taste, why not have one in permanence? When the question arose what was to be done with the surplus profits of the Great Exhibition, it occurred to the Prince Consort and the Executive to found a museum for a permanent exhibition. Accordingly, on accepting from the Board of Trade the task of reforming art instruction throughout the land, Cole recommended the purchase of art objects from the Exhibition. The usual objections of red tape stopped the way for a time, but the indefatigable reformer, backed by the Prince Consort and Lord Granville, triumphed as usual, and a Committee was appointed, empowered to spend a sum of

5000*l.* This transaction is the real origin of South Kensington Museum. The collection then purchased (1851) was the nucleus of a museum of art manufactures "which should have its connection through the whole country and help to make the schools of art as practical in their working as those of France and Germany" (vol. i. p. 283). We may here remark that though there is a circulating department at South Kensington Museum it is by no means in a forward state. A few pictures are lent for six weeks at a time to local schools of art, and whenever an exhibition is got up, South Kensington contributes specimens with not too liberal a hand; but Mr. Mundella has promised more, though in indefinite terms. Wherever a local museum is maintained in fair efficiency there should be a division supplied continuously from South Kensington. It is not enough to wait for local action. The department should invite applications and raise public attention by means of a letter (not circular) sent now to this mayor and now to that. The subject would then probably be brought forward in the Town Council and discussion and inquiry would result. This proceeding would be dreadfully unofficial no doubt; but South Kensington, which inherits the traditions of a sagacious chief, is perhaps the most *human* of all government departments. It can stoop to consider ideas from outside. Possibly steps have been already taken in this direction as regards the Liverpool and Birmingham of our land. The writer's experience with much smaller towns has led to the conclusion that *temporary* aid of the kind above indicated is much needed in the interests of art development; *temporary*, for with regard to the Government and local effort, the aim should be to throw the dependency as soon as prudent on its own resources. First the child is nursed and coddled, then he is placed "under tutors and governors," who harden him off, and at last he is left to manage for himself and to pick himself up when he falls. A vigorous son of the north, whose heart was in this work, laid this down as the best policy: "First a stick and then a kick." It is remarkable, indeed, how small a part of the aid given by the Government reaches the institution for which it is intended. For scientific apparatus teachers have again and again gone into the open market and done better than with the Government aid of 50 per cent. through accredited agents. In books we have known a great part of the aid given by the Science and Art Department to be swallowed up by insufficient deduction from the published price and by unusual charges for packing. The supply of art specimens also is faulty in this respect. It is probable that competition would not permanently remove these objections. The Department should in our opinion *give*, and give not needful things but accessories—not the beef but the condiments—and having thus evoked a more cultivated appetite should leave it to seek its own gratification.

Those who wish to know with what painful steps and slow the magnificent collection at South Kensington was got together, will find full particulars in the latter part of the first volume of this interesting memoir. It was started at Marlborough House, beginning with the art specimens which had been collected for the old Schools of Design and the purchases from the Great Exhibition. Subsequently, grants were made by Parliament for purchasing specimens of artistic specimens of all ages, and the never-

to-be-baffled Director gave his superiors no peace, and probably would have been equally importunate and equally unsatisfied if he had reached the age of Methusaleh. This worrying may have been very unpleasant for the political heads of the department, but it has been a good thing for the country. Whoever visits South Kensington Museum and profits by his visit should bless the pertinacity of Henry Cole. Not only the Government was waylaid, but the Queen and Prince Albert, and other collectors and possessors of art objects were invited and persuaded to give the public an opportunity of seeing them for a time in the Museum. Loan exhibitions of furniture, &c., were formed, and photographs, casts, and electrotypes were made of the finest objects which thus came temporarily into the possession of the Museum. This system of reproduction has helped to develop immensely certain divisions of the Museum, and is likely to be of immense benefit to museums generally. Witness the splendid electrotpe reproductions of Corporation and College plate in South Kensington Museum. Purchases were made from the Bernal Collection and that of M. Soulagues was added to the treasures of South Kensington after an intricate series of negotiations. The pictures which the Rev. John Sheepshanks bequeathed to the nation also found a home here, but his desire that they should be on view for the working people on their day of rest has not been respected. The Editors note the condition on which the bequest was made, and dryly add that after the arrival of the collection at South Kensington it was inspected on many successive Sundays by members of the Legislature and their friends, but it was hardly their Sundays in particular that this public benefactor desired to refine and brighten. South Kensington Museum succeeded to Marlborough House in 1857, and it continued under the rule of "King Cole" till 1873, when he retired on full pay, not altogether willingly, we believe. No doubt he was a despot, but in the early stages of unique institutions a despot is necessary. As it stands, South Kensington Museum is a lasting monument of his foresight, his delight in work, and zeal for the material prosperity of his country.

But the Science and Art Department is Sir Henry Cole's greatest work, and the greatest monument of his genius. How he kept on teasing the Government for money and spending more than was allowed, till at last he had put together a noble collection, and the Museum was a fact—this is generally known; but the history of the Science and Art Department has yet to be told. It was conceived and constructed by a dogged inventive genius which knew how to turn difficulties into stepping-stones to success, and to wear out stolid opposition by vivacious pertinacity.

This Department was formed as a branch of the Education Department, with Henry Cole as its head, its hands, and its feet, under the nominal control of the successive Presidents and Vice-Presidents of the Privy Council. These statesmen we will venture to say had little idea of what was being done in their name. The grants which the manager was able from time to time to obtain were utterly insufficient for ordinary lines. We know the old jog-trot idea which a commonplace mind would have formed: First, to train teachers, and then to found

and maintain schools in the different towns of the land; but Cole's plan was to bribe teachers to qualify themselves by promising them payments on the results of examinations in various centres supplied with papers from London to be worked out under local committees at a minimum of expense. Soon the land was covered with schools of art and science classes, to the astonishment of the statesmen who supposed that they had been holding the reins. As a result, the English people were converted from Philistinism, and became ardent lovers of art. In the poorest cottages may now be found vessels of artistic design and other delights of the eye, as cheap as the ugly patterns which obtained everywhere except in the houses of the richest a few years ago. In the recent debates in the French Parliament on the proposed renewal of the Commercial Treaty with England, the French Minister stated that when that treaty was first made, in 1859, France supplied England with almost all its objects of art, but that in the interval, owing to the work of the schools of art, the tables had been turned, and it was now England that was pouring these articles into France. It was *ce terrible Cole* who had stuck to his work, undeterred by abuse and opposition, till he had redeemed England from its dependence on the ingenuity of France.

Sir Henry Cole's retirement from office in 1873 did not mean retirement from work. Out of office, he set himself to do for music and cookery and sanitation what he had largely done for art, namely, to make their principles and practice common and popular. He pictured an England whose toilers, admitted to participate in the benefits of civilisation, found relief in refined enjoyments from the depression resulting from the minute division of labour into dreary monotonous tasks, without variety. The part he bore in establishing the Kensington Training School of Cookery and the School of Music, and his share in promoting the Albert Hall, will best show the earnest work of his later years. His work and his life in fact ceased together.

Whoever will read the list of the tasks which Sir Henry Cole set himself, as enumerated at the beginning of this article, will not find it hard to discern running through the whole of this busy aggressive life one constant, continuous idea. Like the great English reformer who vowed that he would make things plain for a ploughman which had been reserved for the understanding of a cultivated few, Henry Cole lived to make the poor sharers in the best benefits of modern civilisation. He set himself to make common those refining agencies which tend to cheer and sweeten the dull monotony of excessive toil and hopeless poverty. Hence his efforts to stimulate the creative faculties of the nation, to make known our art treasures, to cheapen specimens of art and to call out the dormant sense of delight in the beautiful, so as to reach and raise men through their higher faculties of enjoyment. He who sets himself to "level up" and to destroy privileges by making them common will have enemies enough in his time. Probably Sir Henry Cole had his full share of abuse and misrepresentation. But, unlike many of the world's benefactors, he lived to see much good fruit resulting from his pertinacious toil for the public good, and he will not soon be forgotten by a grateful country.

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